Traces of Paganism in *The Maine Farmer's Almanac*

1932-1957

ALMANACS are a very old tradition in New England. The first one seems to have been published by Harvard University as early as 1639 or 1640. No copy of this first almanac has come down to us, but single copies have survived of the issues for 1646, 1647 and 1648.

By the end of the 1600s, several competing almanacs were being published every year in Boston. During the 1700s enterprising printers started rival almanacs in all the other New England states, as well as elsewhere in British North America. The longest-lived of them all, *The Old Farmer's Almanac*, was founded by Robert Bailey Thomas. Its first number was for the year 1793, and it has been going strong ever since. Its most recent issue, for 2011, is the 219th in an unbroken series.

Henry Porter Trefethen

Most of these early New England almanacs were severely practical little booklets, with no more romance in them than is found in a table of logarithms. Their centerpiece was always an astronomical calendar for the coming year. Usually they predicted the weather for the whole year, too. They also included short essays on agriculture, bits of worldly wisdom and local history, the dates of the sittings of the state courts and legislature, lists of the inns along the main roads between cities and towns, and so forth. Occasionally they gave a small nod to astrology in the form of a human figure to show which sign of the zodiac governed which part of the body.

Among them was *The Maine Farmer's Almanac*. Its first number was for the year 1819, edited by Moses Springer Jr. After four years the editorship passed to Daniel Robinson. His name continued to appear on the title page for the next 150 years, although the last *Almanac* that Robinson edited was for 1864. All the later editors published their work anonymously, though

we know who most of these men were from other sources. Until the year 1932, *The Maine Farmer's Almanac* was just as dry and unfanciful as any other almanac published in New England.

Then Henry Porter Trefethen became its editor and things began to change. Not much is known about him as a person, but the 26 numbers of *The Maine Farmer's Almanac* that he edited (for 1932-1957) show him developing a strong interest in Pagan calendar lore and folklore.

Harvest Moon and Hunter's Moon

He began in a small way. The Almanac for 1932 was no different from earlier numbers. In the Almanac for 1933 he introduced the names Harvest Moon and Hunter's Moon for the full moons in September and October, and he included an essay on Native American names for all the full moons of the year. This essay was signed C.G.F., and thus was not written by Trefethen, but we do not know to whom those initials refer. In the Almanac for 1934, Trefethen included an essay of his own to explain the terms Harvest Moon and Hunter's Moon.

With the Almanac for 1935, Trefethen introduced a complete system of names for all the twelve (or sometimes thirteen) full moons in the year. He also introduced new names for the solstices and equinoxes. In the Almanac for 1943 he also began to mark the cross-quarter days, thereby giving his readers a complete wheel of the year, just as in modern Witchcraft and many forms of Paganism.

At first Trefethen called the cross-quarter days Midwinter, Midspring, Midsummer, and Midautumn. Beginning with the Almanac for 1945, however, they were named Fire Blessing Day, Beltein – Bonfire Day, Fireless Day, and Samthein – Need-fire Day.

The Long Day and the Long Night

Trefethen named the Winter Solstice Yule, the Long Night. At first, the Summer Solstice was simply called The Long Day in the calendar, though elsewhere in the Almanac for 1935 he referred to it as Lichta, which he said means "day of light." The two equinoxes are called First Day of Spring and Summer's End.

However, in the Almanac for 1945 – the same number in which he first mentioned Beltein and Samthein – he called the Summer Solstice Bael's Day in the calendar. This overt reference to a Pagan God of the Sun must have angered some readers, because the Summer Solstice was left unnamed in the next number of the Almanac (for 1946). Thereafter we hear no more of Bael, but that Solstice is called Aestivum or Estiva (from the Latin word for summer) from 1947 onward.

Trefethen's names of the full moons form a more complicated system. Each of the four seasons normally has three full moons, and they are named in the same way from one year to the next no matter in what month they happen to fall. In its final form, the system of these names is as follows:

	Winter	Spring	Summer	Autumn
First	Yule Moon	Egg Moon	Hay Moon	Harvest Moon
Middle	Wolf Moon	Milk Moon	Grain Moon	Hunter's Moon
Last	Lenten Moon	Honey Moon	Fruit Moon	Ice Moon

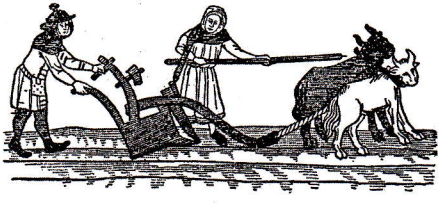
Each of these full moons might fall in either of two months, according to how early in the season it occurs. Thus, the Yule Moon might fall either in December or in January, the Wolf Moon in January or February, and so forth.

Now and then a year will have an extra full moon, making thirteen in all. This extra full moon might happen to fall in any of the four seasons, giving that season four full moons instead of its usual three. When that happens, the first, second and last of these four full moons are still named as in the above table, but another name is needed for the third of these four moons. Trefethen consistently called the third full moon in such a season the Blue Moon, probably from the phrase "once in a blue moon," meaning "rarely." This is the very first use anywhere of the term Blue Moon to refer to a specific full moon in the year. (In Trefethen's system, this Blue Moon will never happen to be the second full moon in a month. The common modern use of the term seems first to appear in the game Trivial Pursuit, where it is an error of fact made by the game's designers.)

What moved Henry Porter Trefethen to introduce these Pagan elements into *The Maine Farmer's Almanac*? We have no way of knowing, but we may speculate just a little. The very first Trefethen, Henry Porter's great-great-great-great-great-grandfather, came from Cornwall in England sometime in the 1670s, in the days when Cornish (a Celtic language) was still spoken there. He settled on Great Island (now called New Castle) in New Hampshire. In those early days, Great Island was a very weakly churched part of New England, and the ancestors of several of its leading families did not come from Protestant England, but from more exotic places – one family even came from the Levant. Could Henry Porter Trefethen have been inspired by something he had heard about his early ancestors? Or, perhaps, was he just curious about his own heritage as a Celt? We have no documents that would answer the question for us.

The last Almanac that Trefethen edited was for 1957. Subsequent editors attempted to maintain his complicated system, but did not fully understand how it operated. First there were a few clumsy mistakes in its use, then outright confusion; the last few numbers of the Almanac gave it up altogether. The very last issue of *The Maine Farmer's Almanac*, no. 154, was for the year 1972.

– ROBERT MATHIESEN



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